

MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS AND THE CONSECRATED OBJECT

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present some ideas on museum exhibitions and aspects of significance of the museum object. It aims at understanding the changes in meaning intrinsic to a museum object—the different meanings resulting from museological processes in its institutional life.

The object selected for this study was an archaeological vestige, a human skull called *Miss Sambaqui*, belonging to the collection of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo, Brazil. This research tested the proposition that when the same museological object is submitted to various exhibitions that belong to different kinds of scientific museum collections they reveal fresh, new values about the object.

Introduction

This paper is the result of an applied museological research project developed between 1999 and 2000 at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo, Brazil. The research examined a specific object in a research collection of a university museum with the purpose of studying its different meanings when submitted to a museological process, i.e., being collected, preserved, researched, communicated, analyzed and evaluated. Through a case study, I investigated how an archaeological artifact became an institutional symbol of Brazilian archaeological research and preservation in the 1950s and how this symbol lost its meaning through the years and eventually acquired new salience in another research institution at the same university.

The general objective was to evaluate the capacity of the museological process to change the meaning of a scientific object in a research university collection. To address this objective, and better understand the museum phenomenon, I focused on a specific object, the human skull *Miss Sambaqui*,¹ which is an archaeological vestige (shell mounts) kept at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo (De Blasis 1991). I have followed the institutional history of this archaeological vestige as it first was made into a symbol of heritage and later became an institutional symbol. In 1954, after being rediscovered and introduced into a museological process, *Miss Sambaqui's* image was turned into a stamp for the Pre-Historical Institution of São Paulo. This paper describes the transformations of this object, which was collected, researched, preserved and exhibited in different ways from the early days of Brazilian Archeology until today. The museological process gives the object new meanings.

The Formation of a Symbol

Some dates are important to understand the changes in *Miss Sambaqui's* meaning. In Brazil, archaeology started in 1954 along the coast of São Paulo State through the work of an archaeological team coordinated by Professor Paulo Duarte.² Duarte was

an important scientist that fought for the preservation of archaeological areas. He created the Pre-Historical State Commission of São Paulo and researched human settlements on the Brazilian coast, trying to discover the remains of the first Brazilian habitants (Duarte 1968). For him, *Miss Sambaqui* was both a discovery and a symbol of the fight for the preservation of archaeological vestiges and sites.³

After *Miss Sambaqui* was collected, it was preserved and displayed in a room at the Pre-Historical State Commission of São Paulo at the University of São Paulo. *Miss Sambaqui* was the most important object on show, and was displayed in the first room that visitors would enter. Unfortunately, there are no images or illustrations of that exhibition, but some reports indicate that *Miss Sambaqui* was actually presented as the first habitant of Brazilian territory.

In 1969, the Pre-Historical State Commission of São Paulo became the Pre-Historical Institute of the University of São Paulo. *Miss Sambaqui* became an institutional symbol. During the same year, Professor Paulo Duarte was banned from the University by the military government of that period. During this time, new archaeologists teams discovered other vestiges of human settlements in the interior of Brazil. Consequently, new theories of human occupation in Brazil were formulated and different vestiges and artifacts were used for reference in studies on the territory's first occupants. Throughout the 1970s, *Miss Sambaqui* continued in its role as an institutional symbol. In 1979, a new exhibition was prepared and the skull was again the principal object. This exhibition celebrated the 27th anniversary of the Pre-Historical Institute. *Miss Sambaqui* was displayed in a case right under the opening title of the exhibition at the entrance to the main hall. The archaeological researches changed but *Miss Sambaqui* continued to represent the same original ideas proposed by Professor Paulo Duarte.

In 1984, the Pre-Historical Institute organized another exhibition called *The Quotidian of Pre-History*, and that time the skull was no longer the main object. *Miss Sambaqui* was still important, but it shared the theme of *first habitants* with other objects (Bruno 1984). With the advance of additional discoveries in Brazil, a

new generation of archaeologists did not accept Duarte's ideas regarding *Miss Sambaqui* being the oldest vestige of human presence in Brazil. Their arguments were represented in that exhibition. *Miss Sambaqui* was displayed in the same case as other coast and countryside Brazilian objects and relegated to a less important area in the middle of the exhibition space.

In 1989, an important institutional transformation forever changed the symbolic character of *Miss Sambaqui*. The Pre-Historical Institute of the University of São Paulo was incorporated by the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology with two other archaeological and anthropological collections of the University, resulting in a single new institution. In its present long term exhibition, called *Forms of Humanity* and open to the public since 1995, the placement of *Miss Sambaqui* illustrates the fusion of the institutions, as it shares the space with countless others objects (Fig. 1). In this exhibition, *Miss Sambaqui* does not stand alone as an example of Brazil's first habitants, but only serves to illustrate the ones that lived in Sambaquis at the coast. Its importance is similar to the shell necklace and other stone tools exhibited in the same showcase under the theme *hunters and gathers of the coast*.

When *Miss Sambaqui* was usurped as evidence of the first Brazilians in archaeological research, I discovered that the object's symbolism did not die. It has been transferred to another institution called the Biology Institution of the University of São Paulo, where there is a Human Evolution Laboratory coordinated by Professor Walter Neves. He worked in the Pre-Historical Institution of the University of São Paulo from the 1970s to 1980s, and he has a professional track similar to Professor Paulo Duarte. Approximately fifteen years ago, Professor Neves coordinated the team that discovered *Luzia* in the State of Minas Gerais in the countryside of Brazil. Today, *Luzia* is the most ancient Brazilian Human archaeological vestige. Nevertheless, *Miss Sambaqui* is the symbol of his laboratory, not *Luzia*. At the Human Evolution Laboratory, *Miss Sambaqui* represents the continuity of the history of the Pre-Historical Institute and the efforts made by Professor Paulo Duarte.



Fig. 1. *Miss Sambaqui* in the fourth exhibition, *Forms of Humanity*. Photograph by Wagner Souza e Silva.

The Museological Exhibition as Institutional Representation

By selecting a given object and following its museological path, it was possible to better understand the changes occurring in the meanings that adhere to these kinds of objects. Different ways of showing an object can be seen as evidence of the institutional life of the object.

From a theoretical perspective, three basic concepts guided this study. The first is related to the notion of collection:

As any assembly of natural or artificial objects kept temporarily or definitively out of the circuit of the economic activities subjected to a special protection in a closed place prepared for this purpose and exposed to public observation. (Pomian 1984)

This includes objects in the research collection of a university museum, such as *Miss Sambaqui*. The second basic concept refers to the museum object as a document. In its broadest sense, this concept stems from the notions of "testimony," "documentability" and "fidelity" that characterize museological collections as a vessel for meanings (Russio 1983). The third concept framing this research was that of exhibition as a privileged space in the "organization of objects for the sake of transmitting ideas" (Meneses 1992). I have applied these three concepts to understand how *Miss Sambaqui*, when exhibited in university museums and in different contexts, could transmit distinguished ideas as well as reveal institutional changes.

The museological process is understood to be a paradigm (Leon 2000). The process is defined as the collection, protection, communication and evaluation of an object. Its presence or absence decides the status of the exhibition.

Results and Discussion

After analyzing the different ways of exhibiting *Miss Sambaqui*, researching the bibliography, conducting interviews, and studying some images, several questions arose: is there a museological material culture? Could it be that apart from being a "science in formation," museology is also a science of transformation? Is the "museum fact"—the point of departure of public contact with the exhibited object (Russio 1983)—a long moment of the museological phenomenon? Before trying to answer these questions, this study looks for coherence and relevancy in their formulation.

Another challenge related to the definition of a museum object is that for an object to be considered a museological object, it has to undergo collection, preservation, research, communication, analysis and evaluation. From this perspective, it is possible to affirm

that *Miss Sambaqui* is a museological object in the research collection of a University Museum.

The museological analysis, based on a case study, proposes the introduction of the concept of "material culture" (Pearce 1994). This means that the museological object has a special history, an institutional tie, and it has its function constantly transformed by researchers, curators and visitors. If an object in a museological exhibition of an archaeological collection can give many indications of its scientific research and institutional course, the same object in different museological exhibitions displays various forms of "communicating ideas" (Ferrara 1991).

Museology is a "science in Formation" (Russio 1984), and it is subjected to museum collections categories, historical changes and social appropriation. Therefore, it also can be understood to be a science of transformation, regarding the meanings of museological objects. The basis of museology action is structured in the field of representational significance, or the "semiophore."⁴ In the same sense, it is possible to ascertain the museological process when visitors observe the exhibition object. It is in this exact moment that the possibility of the construction of a new form of museological knowledge arises. That form evolves from the personal to the social community experience. This experience is understood as the "museal fact." This allows museological studies to analyze a long historical process, its changing character and social practices that cross the museological process. In a certain way, the consciousness of the communicative strength was present since the exhibitions promoted by Charles Willson Peale at the end of the eighteenth century, where the objects were organized in order to evoke certain effects and sensations in the visitors (Stewart 1994).

Conclusion

"Museum Exhibitions and the Consecrated Object" is a study that aims at searching for the increased value of the museum object. The object is understood to be material support of information that must be continuously preserved, researched, communicated, analyzed and evaluated. This is a dynamic process in which transformation is an essential characteristic. In this way, the old prejudice of museums being places for old things or simply warehouses for ancient materials can be dispelled.

Some recent studies on the working process in museums have emphasized the questions mentioned above, particularly those related to zoological collections. When a zoological object enters the museum circuit, it undergoes a radical transformation from natural object⁵ into museological object (Fig. 2). The transformation of a natural object introduced into the museum process differs from that of an archaeological or any other material culture object in that it has an



Fig. 2. *Changing meanings*. Photographs by author.

aggregated cultural value. The main issue resulting from this study—the presence of a Museological Material Culture—must be investigated differently when related to objects without a cultural past. In addition to its semiophore quality, the zoological object has its original value transformed into a cultural value when it becomes the subject of human's social practices, such as in the realm of museology.

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Notes

¹ *Sambaqui* is a name of Tupi origin that identifies a prehistoric accumulation of marine, river and terrestrial mollusks made by Indians where they would live and bury their dead. These formations are found mainly in the south Brazilian coast. The name *Miss Sambaqui* was given to the skull by the archaeologists that found it, because at that point they believed that it belonged to a woman.

² Before 1954 there were researches, but it was only at this time that archaeology gained scientific accuracy.

³ Professor Paulo Duarte was responsible for elaborating the text that became the first law of protection of Sambaqui areas.

⁴ The use of *semiphore* here and throughout this paper draws from Pomian's notion of the invisible, representational aspect of an object, which is contrast to its utility. See Pomian for greater detail.

⁵ Here, the concept of natural objects relates to the ones that are not made by humans and are not in a museum.

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